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C O N F I D E N T I A L CONAKRY 000033

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TAGS: PGOV PREL KDEM GV

SUBJECT: CENI - SAME GUYS, SAME PROBLEMS?

REF: CONAKRY 0003

Classified By: POL/ECON CHIEF SHANNON CAZEAU FOR REASON 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. Private discussions with the president of Guinea's National Independent Electoral Commission (CENI) illustrate possible institutional resistance to effective elections administration. The CENI president suggested that a number of CENI members may simply be looking for a handout and less interested in technical assistance and training. Over half of CENI members come from past electoral commissions) commissions responsible for the organization of the country's blatantly flawed previous elections. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Following the Ambassador,s December 28 meeting with Guinea,s National Independent Electoral Commission (CENI), USAID Director joined CENI President Ben Syllah and three other CENI members for a tour of CENI offices. Sparse furnishings were evident with a few desks and chairs, but no computers or other office equipment. One of the CENI vice-presidents indicated that he thought that the USG assistance mentioned by the Ambassador (reftel) would come as a direct financial contribution to CENI operations and appeared disappointed when he realized that it will come in the form of technical assistance and training.

¶3. (SBU) Before the meeting with the Ambassador, in a private conversation with USAID Director, Ben Syllah said that while the CENI appreciates USG assistance, some CENI members have expressed concern over possible training programs. He noted that a number of CENI members are former members of previous electoral commissions (COMMENT) These non-independent electoral commissions were called CENAs - National Autonomous Electoral Commissions; 14 of the 25 CENI members previously served on CENAs. END COMMENT). According to Syllah, certain members were critical of previous programs, which allegedly were too lecture-based, not participatory enough, and/or seemingly biased in support of the Ministry of Interior and Security.

¶4. (SBU) USAID Director later talked with the project implementer of the previous elections assistance program who explained that when the CENA heard that the USG would be providing \$500,000 in elections assistance, a number of members indicated that the commission would benefit most from a direct infusion of cash. According to contact, many in the CENA were not interested in training and were much more interested in simply getting money. Contact noted that the training had been &highly participatory& and that nothing had been given to the Ministry of Interior, thus raising questions about why members felt that the project favored the government.

COMMENT

¶5. (C) More than half of the CENI is composed of former CENA

members) electoral commissions responsible for organizing blatantly fraudulent elections. Both of the CENI vice-presidents (one from the majority political party and one from the opposition) fall into this category. Ben Syllah seems to have a clear vision of what the CENI needs to do and is working to define how it should be done. However, over half of the CENI is made up of institutional dinosaurs likely to resist training and new ways of thinking about elections administration. For some of them, CENI membership may simply serve as a means for improving their personal financial situations through acceptance of bribes, misuse of funds or other corrupt practices.

¶6. (C) The fact that most of the CENI consists of recycled CENA members illustrates one of the fundamental problems plaguing the political parties in general. A frequently heard criticism of upcoming elections is that they will not truly accomplish anything) that it does not matter who wins as the political parties will continue to put the same people in power. Some voters tell Embassy officials that party leaders are not accountable to the people and not interested in pursuing a reform agenda. The population, they say, is concerned that elections will only perpetuate the crisis of leadership and simply hand over the opportunity to further corrupt the system to people who are fundamentally the same. Failure of the political parties to appoint &fresh8 perspectives to the CENI lends credence to voter concerns. Given this context, Ben Syllah will need all the help he can get if he wants to guarantee transparent, credible elections. Embassy continues to work toward an effective assistance program to achieve this goal. END COMMENT.

CARTER